

U.S. AIRSTRIIP IN LAOS

Hanoi Raids Disrupt
Ho Trail InterdictionBy TAMMY ARBUCKLE
Special to The Star

PS 22, Laos — American ground operations against the Ho Chi Minh trail have been "severely disrupted" by North Vietnamese assaults against this heavily guarded airstrip, sources reported.

PS 22 and its satellite strips, PS 3 and PS 4, are on the east edge of the Bolovens plateau in southern Laos, 5 miles from the network of Communist reinforcement and supply routes to Cambodia and South Vietnam known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

For years, PS 22 has been the home of men of the First Special Guerrilla Unit, the 10th Guerrilla Battalion and their American commanders, a handful of military men working under the Central Intelligence Agency.

These units, mostly composed of Laos hill people with a few Thais, total about 900 men. They have been responsible for harassment raids and pinpointing targets for U.S. Air Force B52 strikes on the south half of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, designed by the CIA as guerrilla zone number one.

Now the guerrillas and their U.S. commanders have had to be replaced by Lao regular troops.

The guerrillas are "demoralized and disorganized," said a Lao military official.

The guerrillas have been sent to Batheng Mountain near the Bolovens town of Pak Song for reorganization, including strengthening by Thai special forces and some Cambodians newly sent to Laos, and retraining by Thai advisers.

Few guerrilla teams are still active. Instead of prowling the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex and seeking North Vietnamese concentrations heading for Cambodia, they are scouring the Bolovens for large North Vietnamese units whose targets are this air strip and Pak Song.

Hanoi's troops already have knocked out the American-run air strips south of here, numbers 38, 166 and 172.

Twenty-nine guerrillas were killed and 66 seriously wounded here in December. This, combined with the high total of guerrilla deaths in actions

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throughout the plateau and continued enemy rocket attack, has driven the guerrillas away, the Lao say.

Now about 1,000 Lao regular troops are digging in here under sporadic rocket attack.

Rolls of barbed wire are being strung around the air strip, foxholes are being constructed, claymore mines are being laid and machineguns set up while armored cars are flown in to provide additional firepower.

Col. Khampen, the government commander here, says his instructions are to defend PS 22 because the Lao government is determined to retain this last foothold on the eastern edge of the Bolovens plateau. His troops are not involved in operations on the trails.

Site 3, a tiny air strip 1,000 feet higher on the hill above the plateau in a stand of pine trees is seen by the colonel as his key defense position here.

The site provides a resting place for American forward air controllers dodging anti-

aircraft flying along the Sekhong Valley.

The collapse of the guerrillas here at Site 22 is undoubtedly having dire consequences for Americans, Cambodians and Lao alike.

American intelligence has been deprived of its eyes on this part of the trail.

The North Vietnamese can now move supplies and reinforcements into Cambodia almost at will.

The Lao government, according to the Lao military, has been forced to commit its last reserves to a fixed defense of the Bolovens.

The fall of PS 22, which is presently extremely likely, would send this reserve force cut off a long way from help and possibly lead to the fall of Pak Song.

This would put the North Vietnamese completely in control of the Bolovens and provide a new base against Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Such a move would severely hinder any South Vietnamese drive into south Laos to smash the trail.

THE WASHINGTON POST

U.S.-Backed Thai Buildup Seen In Laos

By Michael Geller

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thailand is sending several battalions of special guerrilla troops into the southern Laos Panhandle for the first time as part of a U.S.-backed plan to harass expanding Communist supply lines, Congressional sources claim.

Defense and State Department officials, asked about such moves, said they could neither confirm nor deny them.

The reports have also come to the attention of Sen. Walter F. Mondale (D-Minn.) who, late yesterday, sent a letter to President Nixon asking for a public clarification.

If authentic, Mondale said, "a new undertaking of this kind carries the risk of growing American military embroilment in support of the action, as well as the provocation of some escalation by the enemy in response or in anticipation."

According to Capitol Hill sources, the plan to use the Thais was conceived this fall by the Washington Special Action

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The group is a small, top-level collection of State, Defense and White House officials.

Behind the plan, these sources say, was a three-pronged scheme to impede the flow of North Vietnamese war material moving through Laos and into Communist base camps in southern Laos and Cambodia without using U.S. ground troops or advisers, whom Congress has barred from Laos.

The Thai force, said to number more than 1,000 men, has allegedly moved across the border and into the Bolovens Plateau area of Laos in recent weeks.

The Thais reportedly are being used to bolster a 3,000-5,000-man Laotian anti-Communist guerrilla force which has been operating in the same area since last summer as part of an earlier U.S.-backed effort.

U.S. air support is being provided to the combined Thai-Laos force.

The other two parts of the plan reportedly included moving some Cambodian troops to the northern borders of their country to attack

Laos and to attack the area for some time.

contingency plan, never put into operation, to send South Vietnamese troops on a sweep through southern Laos. Thai battalions, according to informed sources, have operated against Communist forces in northern Laos on previous occasions but have not previously crossed the border into the southern Panhandle region.

Hanoi Radio, in a broadcast on Dec. 29 monitored in the West, also referred to the Thai government "clique" as having "sneakily introduced additional Thai troops into the Bolovens and Long Chien areas."

Pentagon officials, for the past several months, have been increasingly concerned over the big Communist buildup in southern Laos. Military sources have pegged the size of the North Vietnamese force there as at least 65,000.

The Communists have also pushed their operating area three-fourths of the way across southern Laos and have assigned an estimated 15,000 men to guard the network of trails.

Military leaders say the Communists probably have been worried about a South Vietnamese sweep through